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FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING AND THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM.

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FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING IS BASED UPON THE DIVISION OF CLASS SESSIONS INTO MODULES OF 20 TO 25 MINUTES. MODULES CAN BE COMBINED IN VARIOUS WAYS TO SUIT THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROCESS, AND MORE FLEXIBLE USE MAY BE MADE OF THE SUBJECT OR CURRICULUM, THE PUPILS, AND THE TEACHERS. IF FLEXIBILITY IS APPLIED TO BOTH THE CURRICULUM AND THE PUPIL, PROGRESS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE MUST BE EXPRESSED IN TERMS OF ACHIEVEMENT RATHER THAN IN TERMS OF TIME SPENT IN THE CLASSROOM. WHILE CHANGING FROM TRADITIONAL TO FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING, IT IS INITIALLY SAFER TO REAPPORTION FAMILIAR ACTIVITIES TO DIFFERENT SPANS OF TIME THAN TO REDISTRIBUTE ACTIVITIES INTO NEW MODES OF INSTRUCTION (LARGE GROUP, SMALL GROUP, LABORATORY). INSTRUCTIONAL COSTS MAY BE CUT BY REPLACING TRADITIONAL INFLEXIBLE CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION WITH LARGE GROUP MEETINGS, LABORATORY WORK, OR SELF INSTRUCTION. HOWEVER, A CAREFULLY PLANNED CURRICULUM IS NECESSARY TO ALTERNATE BETWEEN THESE KINDS OF INSTRUCTION. FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING CAN BE AN IMPORTANT TOOL FOR SOLVING SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONAL PROBLEMS AND IMPROVING INSTRUCTION. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE DFL BULLETIN," VOLUME 7, NUMBER 1, OCTOBER 1967, PAGES 6-8. (AF)

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Flexible Scheduling and the Foreign Language Curriculum

by Robert L. Politzer
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In this short paper I should like to comment upon and expand some of the findings concerning Flexible Scheduling and Foreign Language instruction which I have presented elsewhere in a different context (Dwight W. Allen and Robert L. Politzer, *A Survey and Investigation of Foreign Language Instruction Under Condition of Flexible Scheduling* OE-6-14-026, 1966, "Foreign Language Instruction and Flexible Scheduling": A conference report, *MLJ* LI (1957), 275-281). The essence of Flexible Scheduling can be explained best by comparing the flexible in the inflexible system of scheduling. In the inflexible system every subject is typically scheduled for 5 class meetings per week. All class meetings last the same length of time (usually some 50 to 60 minutes). The pupils are always under the tutelage of the same teacher and the same pupils meet always in the same class. In the flexible system of scheduling, the school day is divided into small modules (usually 20 to 25 minutes). Modules can be combined so that individual class sessions can last about any length of time from one to three, four, or even more modules. The schedule can thus differentiate between the specific requirements of individual subjects and — within each subject — between the requirements of different activities associated with instruction in the subject. Large group instruction, small group instruction, laboratory, individual study or individual conferences with the teacher can be scheduled so that different combinations of modules are allotted to each of these activities.

Teachers meet pupils in order to impart a specific subject matter to them. The purpose of Flexible Scheduling is, of course, flexible instruction. The flexibility of instruction gained through Flexible Scheduling may be used for a more flexible treatment of any one or all of three elements involved in the instructional process: (1) The subject and the curriculum, (2) the pupils, and (3) the teachers.

The concept of applying Flexible Scheduling to the curriculum as a whole is, in a sense, not all new to the foreign language teaching profession. It is really implied in the concepts of Stream and Level as it has been developed by Nelson Brooks and others (see Nelson Brooks, *Language and Language Learning,* 2nd ed., 1964 pp. 119 *ff.*). The proficiency gained in one year of high school instruction can be equated to the one achieved under different conditions of scheduling and shorter contact periods in 2 years of Junior High School, or 4 years of Elementary school, etc. It is of interest to note, though, that so far the concept of stretching a level over a period of more than one year has been applied only to the first level of the curriculum and not to the more advanced levels where dilution of exposure may in fact be more practical than in the beginning stages and where some benefits can be derived from such a diluted exposure.

The chief benefit that may be derived from the possibility of stretching an advanced level of the foreign language curriculum over grades 11 and 12 by scheduling foreign language for 2½ hour contacts weekly, is that such scheduling may allow pupils to continue with foreign language instruction, while the rigid schedule of 5 hours weekly may leave them no choice but to drop the foreign language. This pressure to drop the foreign language may be exerted from other subjects in the curriculum — but it may also stem from the desire to start the study of a second foreign language. The general trend toward the early start in foreign language instruction has the effect that ever-increasing numbers of pupils reach proficiency equal to level II or even III by the time they finish the 9th or 10th grades. If these pupils want to take up the study of another language and at the same time continue with the language in which they got the early start, the inflexible scheduling systems force them to spend 10 class hours weekly in foreign language instruction. Even if the pupil is ready and willing to spend these 10 class sessions with foreign languages, the pressure of requirements in other areas makes a 10 class hour exposure often impossible (and perhaps even undesirable). The pupil is then faced with the alternative of either dropping the language in which he got the early start or to continue with it but to forgo the possibility of learning another language. He becomes, in a sense, the captive of the language which he chose in the elementary school or junior high school (or the language in which his school system happens to have an elementary school program). Flexible Scheduling would make it possible for the pupil to maintain contact with his first language while at the same time beginning the study of a second.

Flexible Scheduling may, of course, also be used for the purpose of dividing instructional time in a more imaginative and functional way than the 5 x 10 minute blocks made available by the traditional schedule. Especially in a subject like foreign language, where at times fatigue or even boredom may set in during the last 10 minutes of a 50 minute session, it may be advisable to provide class sessions which last less than 50 or 60 minutes. In many traditionally scheduled schools one of the regular 50 minute sessions is often set aside for laboratory work. With flexible scheduling it becomes, of course, quite easy to divide this 50 minute session into 2 x 25 minute modules scheduled at different days of the week. There is only one word of caution that must be expressed in connection with using flexible scheduling for the purpose of providing more frequent and shorter contacts: the efficiency gained by the shorter contact should not be lost as the result of the more frequent moving, roll-taking, etc. which is implied in having more classroom and/or laboratory sessions. Inefficient "housekeeping" can quite easily offset any advantage gained by shortening the contact periods.

The real advantage and challenge of flexible scheduling, however, does not lie in simply giving different time allotments to the very same program carried out under an inflexible system. It lies primarily in the possibility of making small group or even individual instruction available to each pupil. The principle that applies here is simply that all the modes of instruction mentioned above — large group, small group, individual instruction, laboratory and self-instruction — can be used in a flexibly

scheduled system. The utilization of these modes of instruction requires that the subject and curriculum must be carefully scrutinized and that the activities which are appropriate for each of these modes of instruction must be determined. It is quite evident that most of language teaching consists in processes of eliciting responses, the accuracy of which must be checked by the teacher. There is little doubt that the mode of instruction that seems most applicable to language teaching (and perhaps to teaching generally speaking) is the small group and the individual conference. It is also equally obvious that individual conferences and small group instruction are the most expensive modes of instruction. To put the problem quite bluntly in economic terms: If we do want small group or individual instruction in some phases of the language curriculum, they must be "bought" by the utilization of the other modes (large group and self-instruction) in other phases of the program. Thus, three classes of, let us say, first year French meeting in a traditionally scheduled program in class periods of 50 minutes each normally require 750 ($5 \times 50 = 250$. $3 \times 250 = 750$) minutes of instructional time. If for two class sessions, or their equivalent, these classes meet in one large group with only one teacher, the remaining 650 minutes of instructional time can now be utilized for smaller group meetings. These 650 minutes could be utilized as 26 modules of 25 minutes each. Assuming that the total enrollment of our three classes was about 100 pupils, these 26 modules would allow us to meet these pupils *once* in groups of three or four (a most unlikely solution) or twice in groups of eight, three times in groups of about 12, four times in groups of 16, etc. In other words, the four modules (100 minutes) large group instruction, allow us to use three or four modules for relatively very small groups.

Let us emphasize, however, that the direction in which language instruction must move to take full advantage of Flexible Scheduling is obviously not large group instruction. Large group instruction is and has always been a feasible economy measure in subjects involving lecturing, or explaining. Foreign language instruction is based primarily on pupil-teacher interaction. Teaching and explaining form only a small part of the process of instruction. Obviously, large group instruction can be utilized for the purpose of introducing cultural materials for special guest lectures by native speakers, etc. In other words it is appropriate for activities not very closely tied to the specific structure of the course.

However, if the large group is to be used as regular means of a portion of instruction, then it becomes necessary to decide for just what activities continuous teacher-pupil interaction is least necessary and relegate these activities to the large group. Typically, the activities chosen are the presentation of basic materials, the explanation of grammatical principles or testing.

A skillful and inspiring teacher can indeed be quite successful in engaging in these activities with large groups. If such a teacher is available then it may indeed be worthwhile to "buy" small group interaction by large group instruction. An alternation of groups of 100 and 12 may be more efficient than continuous use of groups of 35. The real objection against the use of the large group in foreign language is — in my opinion at least — not that the large group is necessarily useless, but that it brings even larger numbers of students into a lock step progression than would otherwise be necessary. In our hypothetical example of three first year French classes, the traditional scheduling would have at least enabled us to establish a slow, fast, and medium group — and to move students from one group to the other. Utilization of the large group as an integral part of the instructional process would make even this very minimal individualization of instruction impossible.

With this consideration in mind, let us consider briefly the flexibility that can be applied not simply to the subject but to the individual pupil. To return to our example of the three first year French classes which take up a total of 750 minutes of instructional time: these 750 minutes represent 30 modules of 25 minutes which can be used to meet the 100 pupils representing these classes once in groups of three or four, twice in groups of six or eight, etc. As Professor Valdman has once suggested in a well known article ("How do we break the lock step?" *Audio-Visual Instruction* VII (1962), 630-33) these small group meetings can be combined with the use of self-instructional materials and be utilized to check upon the students progress and give him the opportunity to apply what he has learned through programmed instruction. Students can be shifted from one small group to another according to their rate of progress. Flexible Scheduling makes it comparatively easy to solve the scheduling problem posed by such a program since it assigns blocks of time for self-instruction, modules for group meetings, etc. to each student's schedule. The individualization of instruction which can be achieved through a combination of small group meetings and programmed instruction is a highly desirable goal. It is only fair to point out however that it is also likely to be a fairly expensive way of instruction. Thus in the example quoted we have only considered the 750 minutes of instructional time used on the part of the teacher. In actual practice, the time spent in self-instruction in a language laboratory with probably quite expensive self-instructional materials will constitute another and major part of the instructional expense.

Most of what can be said about utilizing Flexible Scheduling to apply flexibility to the utilization of the teaching staff is implied in what we have discussed already. Obviously, if large groups, small groups, and the language laboratory are utilized as different modes of instruction, teaching personnel can be assigned to these different types of instruction to achieve maximum efficiency — as well as some economy. Obviously, the assignment to present basic materials or grammatical explanations to large groups can be given to the teacher most experienced and most efficient in these activities. The general supervision of laboratory work or self instruction can be left to different — perhaps less highly paid — personnel. At any rate, the division of teaching into different tasks, assigned to different individuals demands a great deal of team work, a great deal of cooperation and a certain frankness in the recognition of one's strengths and weaknesses.

One point should be made quite clear: there is no generally applicable recipe as to how flexible scheduling can be utilized best in foreign language instruction. The very concept of flexibility implies that the best application must be determined within the objectives, size, and staff resources of a specific situation. The conference on Flexible Scheduling (see Allen and Politzer *op. cit.*) has already identified certain problems and made certain recommendations concerning Flexible Scheduling and Foreign Language Education. To these recommendations I should like to add the following comments:

1. Both, flexibility applied to the curriculum and to the pupil, require that progress in foreign language be expressed in terms of achievement rather than in terms of time spent in the classroom. One year of foreign lan-

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guage becomes a fairly meaningless and vague term of reference if one pupil may cover two levels of work in one year while perhaps another takes two years for the achievement of the same proficiency. In a similar way covering the 3rd and 4th level in two years of instruction makes it impossible to use the school year as a measure of progress. With flexibility in the teaching program, the level of proficiency remains as the only meaningful constant. Flexible teaching should be accompanied by this recognition, and high school credits (and possibly college entrance requirements or recommendations) should then be expressed in terms of levels rather than years of contact.

2. In the process of changing from traditional to Flexible Scheduling, it seems that — initially at least — it is safest to be satisfied with reapportioning familiar activities to different spans of times (e.g., give a fourth level course in more than one year or split the 50 minute lab session into 2 - 25 minute modules). The redistribution of activities into new modes of instruction (large group, small group, laboratory) is a much more problematical and complicated procedure which requires a great deal of thought and planning.

3. Replacing traditional inflexible class room instruction by large group meetings, laboratory work or "self instruction" is a device that can be used to cut instructional costs. Cutting instructional costs is a perfectly legitimate and often necessary objective, but it should be spelled out and not be disguised under the name of innovation. As we have stressed already, large group instruction must be used very carefully, is at best problematical, and must be integrated with the rest of instruction on a very carefully planned basis. To set aside periods for "self instruction in the laboratory" or even "intensive practice," if materials specifically designed for these activities are in fact not available, is a very questionable procedure. Thus if the introduction of large group instruction or so-called "self-instructional" periods is not carefully planned and compensated for by small group instruction, the net effect of Flexible Scheduling is likely to be a loss of instructional efficiency. If this loss of efficiency is, indeed, the result of a necessary economy measure, then it becomes again imperative to express the goals of the curriculum in terms of constant performance levels rather than years, in order to assess just how much efficiency had to be sacrificed to economy.

4. Alternating between large groups, small groups, laboratory, etc., necessitates a carefully planned curriculum based on experience in a particular situation. In other words, it is quite likely that a flexibly scheduled program will not operate smoothly during the first year or even second year. It requires a great deal of experimentation, planning and, above all, team work to evolve a flexibly scheduled program. The large group session must get the student ready for the small group activity as planned. The program for the lab module must take off from where the pupils were left in their last small group sessions. Without careful planning, it may become necessary that small group sessions go over material that should have been covered in the large group. The laboratory program may partly and perhaps unnecessarily repeat the material that have been presented in the small group. The small group instructor may spend his time answering the questions of which he thinks that they should have been dealt with in the large group — and-so-on. Especially in the first year of operation a flexible schedule may indeed be felt as a rather rigid framework superimposed upon the flexibility to which the individual instructor operating by himself is accustomed. Unless there is willingness to work as a team and to profit from the lessons of experience, flexible scheduling may indeed be and remain a rigid framework.

5. The above consideration leads to our final and most general conclusion. Since, almost by definition, flexibility is a virtue (just as its counterpart "rigidity" is a vice) there is a strong temptation to want to be "flexible." But, to paraphase a well known saying, a rigid schedule which allows some flexibility to the individual instructor and which enables us to reach educational objectives, is not necessarily a vice — and flexibility without goals is not a virtue.

Flexible scheduling is a tool. It should not be used for its own sake in order to appear modern and innovative. If it is used to solve very specific instructional problems, to fill very definite and well perceived needs, then it can, indeed, become an important instrument in the improvement of instruction.

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